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The Holy Fool in Russian and American Culture: A Dialogue

Dana Heller and Elena Volkova

Preface: The following dialogue could be considered a methodological as well as formal experiment in comparative cultural analysis. It is the result of a cross-cultural, transnational discussion and exchange between two scholars and professors of American literature, one Russian (Elena Volkova) and one American (Dana Heller). The foundation for this dialogue was established two years ago when Volkova and Heller team-taught a course in American literature at Moscow State University, in the Faculty of Foreign Languages. That course ignited an intellectual spark and a mutual willingness to experiment with forms of scholarly interaction and productivity. Indeed, rarely do Russian and American scholars have an opportunity to develop actual face-to-face dialogue on literary criticism and cultural studies. Such contact is vital and beneficial, not only for developing comparative cultural analysis but for developing new,

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progressive forms of teaching and international publication. This lecture, a comparative analysis of the holy fool character in Russian and U.S. literature and culture, is one of a series of lectures that have been written for a course titled, "*Litzom k Litzu*" / "Face to Face." The year-long course is structured in the form of an ongoing dialogue between the two lecturers. By bringing together in one course the different faces and voices of Russian and American culture, it is hoped that these lectures will help open up a space for the further discussion and realization of our common, as well as our different traditions, histories, values, assumptions, and forms of representation.[1]

EV: The main visual symbol of Russia known in the West is that of the Cathedral of Saint Vasilii, or Saint Basil, located on Red Square in Moscow. However, not many Americans know that Saint Basil was a holy fool who lived in Moscow in the 16th century. Thus, in a sense, the main visual symbol of Russia may be called the Cathedral of the Holy Fool.

One of the most popular characters in Russian folklore is Ivan the Fool, who is "a secular variant of the Holy Fool" (A.M. Panchenko). On the surface, Ivan the Fool seems lazy and stupid but he is "a chosen one." Miraculous forces help him. He wins at the end of the fairy tale and gets the princess along with half of the kingdom. If the mystical subtext of Russian fairy tales were not taken into consideration, one would see Ivan the Fool simply as a symbol of national laziness and stupidity. Ivan does seem a fool in common, practical situations (in matters of domesticity and working the land, etc.), but he is a hero in the struggle between good and evil, and the supernatural world is native to him.

Russian classical literature inherited hagiography's, i.e. lives of saints, goal of creating the ideal character although there were more failures than achievements. Dostoevski wrote to his niece Sophia Alexandrovna Ivanova (Jan, 1, 1868): "To depict a positively good man is the main underlying thought in the novel. There can be nothing harder than that on earth especially nowadays. All writers - not only ours but even all of them in Europe - who have attempted to depict what is positively good have always failed to do it. It is because the task is an immeasurable one." Dostoevski's attempt resulted in Prince Myshkin the Idiot.

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A question arises: Is there something deep inside the Russian mentality that correlates with the state of insanity? Many people in the West and even in Russia would readily say: "Yes, there is. Russians cannot organize their life in a proper way. They carry on terrible, bloody experiments with their own country. They destroy their own traditions. There is little logic in their politics and economy." We Russians ourselves often exclaim: "What is going on? But, after all, what else can we expect in this country of fools?!"

Thus, in Russia the concept of "foolishness" is apparent on different cultural levels: religious, folkloric, literary, political, and on the level of everyday life. Different levels may be understood through the two different meanings of foolishness presented in the Bible. "Fool" in the book of Proverbs, as well as in the book of Psalms, is one who "despises wisdom and instruction" (1,7) or we can find there phrases like "the thought of foolishness is sin" (24,9), "It is as sport to a fool to do mischief: but a man of understanding has wisdom" (10,23). In this context "fool" means one who doesn't know or who has forgotten God, who follows his sins, or earthly wisdom. "Foolish" as "godless" can explain the "foolishness" on the social, political and everyday level.

The second meaning of "foolishness" we can find in the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians where he opposes wisdom of this world to the true one which may be found only in Christ: "Let no man deceive himself. If any man among you seemeth to be wise in this world, let him become a fool, then he may be wise. For the wisdom of this world is foolishness with God" (1 Cor, 3, 1819) and then: "we are fools for Christ's sake; we are weak but ye are strong; ye are honourable, but we are despised" (1 Cor, 4, 10). Paul uses irony and sarcasm, comparing the relative comfort of the Corinthians with the persecuted, poverty-stricken life of the apostles; but, in a wider sense, he compares those who follow Christ with those who prefer earthly values. This meaning of a "fool," as of one who is foolish in this world but wise in God, became the biblical basis for the holy fool tradition in Eastern Christianity.

The holy fool is a person who pretends that he is mad in order to save his own soul and the souls of others. He chooses to become homeless, poor, disdained and persecuted as Christ Himself was. The holy fool teaches people by means of images of sin and he tells

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them truth disguised behind a fool's appearance and behaviour. The Russian word for "holy fool" is *iurodivyi*. The stem "iurod" corresponds to the ancient Greek word meaning "mad, stupid" and *salos* meaning "simple, stupid." Two Russian holy fools were named Salos. The first holy fools appeared in Egypt. In the Middle Ages, however, this holy fool type of saint flourished mainly in Russia until the 18th century, when Peter the Great issued several edicts against "the fools." The Russian word *urod* means "ugly one." Holy fools used to appear in public practically naked or they would wear dirty, torn clothing. (Their nakedness was considered not only indecent but also reminded people of Satan who was traditionally depicted naked on frescoes.) St. Paul said that God "had chosen the foolish things of the world to confound the wise" (1 Cor, 27). The fool's naked, dirty, ugly, strange and indecent appearance was a metaphor for humankind's soiled, "naked," sinful soul that has lost its "wedding garments," its innocence. Becoming insane, becoming "a fool," humanity has lost its divine likeness and lost its God. The holy fools look the way human beings really look in a spiritual sense. They become spiritual symbols - strange and almost disgusting in appearance, but tragic and attractive from a spiritual point of view. The holy fools' disgraceful behaviour carried the message of judgment. Those who understood the message started to cry; those who did not laughed at the fools and threw stones at them.

There was no tradition of holy fools as saints in the West.

DH: Actually, that assumption depends on whether one is speaking strictly of canonization or of canons. In the case of the latter, I would have to disagree: the holy fool or divine idiot is a frequently encountered figure in the history, folklore, literature, and religious traditions of many western cultures. While the image of the holy fool has its roots in early Christian thought, it has been historically reshaped along a variety of secular trajectories, largely as a result of the social and ecclesiastical transformations that took place in Europe from the medieval to early modern period. According to John Saward, author of *Perfect Fools,* the religious significance of the divine idiot constitutes "one strand in the history of sainthood," a figure related to although not identical with the ancient tradition of holy fools, or folly for Christ's sake.[2] The Christian tradition of holy folly begins, as you point out, with St. Paul who first used the ex-

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pression a "fool for Christ's sake" and referred to the idea of divine folly in his account of his conflicts with the Corinthian Church.[3]

While the saintly vocation of the holy fool gained most recognition in the Orthodox Christian East, and particularly in Russia, the divine idiot has nevertheless played a significant role in the West, both in Western Catholicism and in the Protestant denominations. Saward's history focuses primarily on the tradition of folly for Christ's sake before and in seventeenth-century French religious thought, however he rightly identifies the phenomena as existing "in the radical and spiritual wings of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, in the 'Methodism' (in the full, pejorative, eighteenth-century sense of the term) of the early followers of Wesley, and in the many revivalist groups of the present day, indeed in all the enthusiastic and hectic religion on the fringe, and sometimes at the centre, of the Reformed communions."[4] The tradition of divine idiocy in all of these contexts expresses a similar paradox: If the wisdom of the world is but folly to God, and if God's own foolishness is the one true, divine wisdom, then the worldly must renounce all worldly wisdom in order to become truly wise. One must become, by an act of will, a fool. Divine idiocy is thus a form of repudiation: one repudiates the vainglorious wisdom of the world and cultivates the childlike trust and spiritual naivete which is a defining mark of Christian perfection. Early American Puritans and evangelical Methodists, who, in principle if not in practice, looked disapprovingly upon the mixing of religious worship with forms of playful blasphemy, rejected the tradition of folly for Christ's sake as degenerate and degrading to Christian integrity and enlightened human reason. However, as American writings of the eighteenth and nineteenth century gradually developed into discernible patterns of narrative form, theme, and character, the image of the holy fool or divine idiot (which I believe is the more appropriate term for describing the American variant) evolved into a character type with clear affinities to both the Eastern Orthodox and non-Orthodox Christian fool image. In American literature, the divine idiot is a hybrid form which grows out of the crossings of numerous literary and historical currents, both secular and non-secular, none of which are themselves utterly monolithic or unified: the history of Christian Saints; the philosopher fools of ancient Rome; the professional fool tradi-

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tion, traceable back to the courts of the Egyptian pharaohs and the Mexican Aztecs who may have believed that the physically deformed and/or mentally handicapped possessed supernatural powers of magic and healing; the secular fool imagery which developed out of Renaissance Humanism, and, related to this, traditions of courtly and/or royal fool imagery, as that which informs Shakespearean tragedies such as *Hamlet* and *King Lear;* the natural and/or rural divine idiot of Romanticism, such as that represented by Dostoevski's Prince Myshkin in *The Idiot* and Wordsworth's *Idiot Boy;* and, the folkloric and oral narratives of African-American tradition and Native-American tribal cultures (for example, the coyote or "trickster" figure who bears a resemblance to the holy fool). This unwieldy hybridity, or the fact that divine idiots in American literature resonate across so many historical, national, cultural, and ethnic boundaries—while retaining some loose correspondence with earlier Christian prototypes—has rendered them difficult to locate within theories of character or archetype in American literary criticism. However, it is my argument that the divine idiot is a very common and central figure in U.S. myths of nation and character. Indeed, one encounters idiots in American literature as well as in American folklore, popular culture, and mass media.[5] From the works of Flannery O'Connor, John Steinbeck, and William Faulkner to the animated MTV serial *Beavis and Butthead,* to contemporary Hollywood films such as *Being There, Forrest Gump,* and *The Green Mile,* variations on the theme of divine idiocy resonate across conventional boundaries of form, genre, and national culture.[6] The Russian film-maker and producer, Sergei Selianov, recently remarked: "Strangely enough, in contemporary European cinema films have started to appear which we would never have expected from Europe, but rather from our own film-makers. We had thought that this was our exclusive territory. Such is the case with American films such as *Forrest Gump* (USA, 1994) with its Ivan-the-Fool type character of Russian history."[7] Clearly, then, there seems to be a connection between the Russian type of fool and the American fool, and I believe John Saward's study is helpful in tracing the roots of this connection in Christianity.

EV: I think that the aim of critical analysis is to make unwieldy hybridity clear, to define the types that made a hybrid, to isolate the

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initial ingredients and to select the most valuable ones among them. The precious type of Orthodox Christian ascetic in Russian culture practices *iurodstvo*, which represents the highest plane of foolishness in Christ in Russian Orthodox Christianity. Russia has a well developed hagiographical type of saint, which doesn't exist in the West. But the difference between Russian *iurodivyi* and the holy fools in the West is not only that of canonization but also of canons. John Saward wrote *Perfect Fools* about French saints (and one example from Ireland) for the Catholic Christian to discover "that something apparently Eastern, so Byzantine, as folly for Christ's sake, is also one of the features of a Christian tradition in the very Far West, at 'the end of the world'—in Ireland. Such a discovery can open the eyes of his mind to the fact that what is "different' in another tradition is already found in his own" (31).

If holy folly presents the tradition which is to be discovered several centuries later then we come across some marginal phenomenon in Western culture the significance of which cannot be compared to the symbol of St.Basil's cathedral in Russia. John Saward presents a fascinating gallery of saints: St. Suibne, St. O Riain, St. Romuald, St. Francis of Assisi, Ramon Lull, St. Philip Neri, and many others. Saward carefully collects all the available signs of holy folly in the West but he understands the Holy Fool phenomenon so widely that almost every true Christian may participate in it: "We might, then, state this general rule: all saints are fools for Christ's sake, but some are called to be more foolish than others" (212). According to Saward, a common denominator of holy folly is "'the fools' enthusiasm for God" (216), which doesn't help to differentiate the Holy Fool from the rest of sainthood at all.

There are several saints, however (St. Philip Neri [1515-1595], Jean-Joseph Surin [1600-1665], Louise de Neant [1639-?] among them) whom Saward calls fools for Christ's sake "in the classical Eastern sense." Hence, we need a clear definition of the classical Orthodox type of holy fool. A common denominator must be the voluntarily renunciation of mind, of sanity, in its worldly meaning, without any chance to reclaim it again in the eyes of men. This criterion is much stricter than a more general enthusiasm for God, suggested by Saward. But it makes the situation with holy folly more clear and definite. To draw the distinction between the Christian Orthodox

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type of saint and the general tradition of holy folly typical of Christian sainthood in general we'd best use the Russian word *iurodivyi* in our dialog. It seems that the English expression "holy fool" has a much wider meaning and is easily applied to secular culture. For example I could never understand in what sense Kerouac uses the words "holy" and "divine" in his novel *On the Road*.

DH: You raise a number of important issues here, particularly with respect to Saward and to Kerouac. I want to answer the question you raise about Kerouac's use of the terms "holy" and "divine," but I first want to emphasize that "holy fool" or "divine idiot" is an imperfect rendering into English of a term that has no precise English equivalent. That's part of the risk we've undertaken in attempting to locate cultural analogues of the phenomenon of *iurodstvo*, or foolishness in Christ. We come to this dialogue from two different languages, and hence, from two different realities. Along those lines, I also want to make mention of your comment about Saward's use of the word "enthusiasm" because again I think it is relevant to understanding one of the linguistic challenges we face in comparing Russian *iurodivyi* and American divine idiots. The word "enthusiasm" has a mundane meaning with which all English speakers are familiar. One can be enthusiastic about planting rose bushes or eating sushi, in the sense that one experiences a general eagerness to engage in these activities. In the context of religious worship, however, enthusiasm takes on a greater weight which comes closer to suggesting a condition of fervor, fever, or fanaticism. Enthusiasm here refers to the state of being entirely given over to one's faith. In this ecclesiastical context, the meaning of "enthusiasm" more closely resembles the common denominator that you describe: the practice of renouncing all but devotion to God.

Now to Jack Kerouac: As you have so well described, the holy fool simulates, or performs a state of madness in order to bring about his own salvation as well as the salvation of others. If the latter is to happen, the holy fool's performance will require an audience as well as the willingness of the fool to expose himself, to produce shock, and to appear a despised and repellent creature and/or potential threat to the established social order. This is precisely the role that Dean Moriarty assumes in the novel that helped define the meaning of "holy fool" for the post-World War II generation in the U.S.,

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Kerouac's *On the Road.* At the climax of the novel, Sal Paradise (his name itself a play on the concept of Christian perfection) recognizes that his idol and traveling companion, Dean Moriarty, is detested and despised by their friends. Sal defends Dean, as he does consistently throughout the novel, and then proclaims: "Suddenly, I realized that Dean, by virtue of his enormous series of sins, was becoming the Idiot, the Imbecile, the Saint of the lot....That's what Dean was, the HOLY GOOF."[8]

Here, Kerouac uses the terms "holy" to indicate that Dean Moriarty is touched by something magnificent and god-like, something that makes him, in Sal's eyes, "worthy of veneration and awe."[9] Dean has repudiated all worldly values and behaviors that Americans of the post-World War II period ostensibly held most dear: work-ethic, stability, family, responsibility, etc., and has thus become a martyr. Moreover, Dean cannot change, he cannot turn back and become the kind of person who would fit in with society and not offend the sensibilities of the mainstream. What Dean offers (or so Sal believes) is salvation from the hypocrisy, dullness, and institutional repressions of American life in the 1950s. And it may be useful to keep in mind that Kerouac uses the present participle form "becoming" to describe Sal's perception of Dean. Sal doesn't say that Dean Moriarty IS a saint, he claims that he is "becoming....the Saint of the lot." This distinction is useful because "becoming" indicates a process rather than a state of being, and this is precisely in accordance with the philosophical emphasis of the Beat Movement on motion, discovery, revelation, and salvation...in motion and in the present. Hence, of course, the novel's title: *On the Road.*

EV: So one may be (sorry, becoming) a saint if he tries to save himself from dullness, hypocrisy by means of drinking alcohol, making love, children and leaving them as soon as he feels like it? There is a difference between the will and the way. The point of departure is common for both, a saint and a rebel, they both repudiate the world but then they go to different poles: a saint goes up to God through self-restriction, purification and prayer, which is the way for unity with God, while Moriarty goes down, to self-destruction, restless rush, which may be called motion, but this is a feverish run from the unsolvable problem of salvation without God. The holy fool, for example, remains in prayer at night, even in

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the bitter cold. He usually prays somewhere outside of the town, alone in a field, half-dressed or naked. He achieves miraculous control over his body. He is able to remain alive in winter without any clothing, without sleep, food or shelter. He stays in permanent spiritual contact with God and is blessed and ruled by the Lord. A God-like figure cannot live like Moriarty, there is nothing that would remind one of God in his character. He might be called a God-seeking character, but unconsciously seeking, because he is running from both hypocrisy and God. If one wants to fight against hypocrisy s/he should truly live the life which hypocritical people only pretend that they live. Kerouac mocks the "serious" official culture and its established authorities like Karl Marx (one if his character's name is Carlo Marx) and Dostoevski (Remi calls him Dostioffskis) but he doesn't see the difference between the two. But it is the difference between Karl Marx and Dostoevski that might illustrate how big the gap is between a godless and God-like values.

As far as the comparison between saints and characters is concerned I think that the similarities between the actual holy fool and the fool character in fiction show how deeply both literatures are rooted in Christianity and the differences between the two reveal how far human beings are from God and his saints.

DH: That is a large statement to make on behalf of the global influence of Christianity. Certainly, I agree with you that Russian literature is rooted in Christianity, but I question the usefulness of this assumption for understanding world literature. I think it can produce misreadings, in the same way that moral and cultural standards, when applied evenly across the board, eclipse certain cultural and historical particularities which can be very important. For example, you claim that Kerouac makes fun of "serious 'official' culture" by naming his character Carlo Marx. However, this is hard to imagine when one considers that in the United States, in the decade of the 1950s, Karl Marx was in no way representative of "official" culture; on the contrary, he was marginalized in American political life, demonized by the social conservatives of the time, and questioned by leftist intellectuals faced with the failure of revolutionary politics.[10] Kerouac was not a Marxist per se, but he did hold a great deal of respect for Marx as a visionary philosopher. By naming his character Carlo Marx, Kerouac actually pays an honor to

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Allen Ginsberg (the Carlo Marx character) whom he and the Beat writers considered the most intellectual and visionary among them. In addition, Kerouac often referred to Dostoevski as one of the most important literary influences in his own work, not someone whom he would have set out to belittle or poke fun at.

Dean Moriarty's behavior (drinking, sex, irresponsibility, etc.) may seem to set him entirely apart from what Christian studies would regard as a legitimate holy fool figure. However, I propose (from a comparative literary studies rather than a Christian studies perspective) that this same behavior actually connects him to this tradition. Dean's behavior produces shock and outrage among all those who know him (except Sal), just as the holy fools who wandered naked and filthy throughout the streets of medieval Russia produced outrage and disgust among those who did not understand their message. Holy fools may have spent all night in prayer; Dean seeks out jazz (which the Beat Movement venerated and elevated to a form of prayer and spiritual meditation), and spends his nights in rapture. Obviously, Dean is not a Christian believer, and Kerouac is not suggesting that he be canonized. Rather, the holy fool provides a powerful metaphor for the Beat writers, and Dean's representation as "the saint of the lot" is a metaphorical gesture consistent with the social, cultural, and historical context of its time. Indeed, in one significant way, the meaning of the term "Beat," as defined by the writers of the Beat Movement, is synonymous with the meaning of divine idiot as derived from legends of the Christian saints. Above all, Dean's divine purpose is to MOVE (just as the purpose of the Beat philosophy was MOTION), and here he converges most meaningfully with the tradition of divine idiocy in the idea of idiot as pilgrim or perpetual wanderer. As Saward explains, "Peregrination is a way of practising self-abasement, for unlike the Pilgrim to the Holy Places, who has a definite earthly destination, the exile or *peregrinus* has a dangerously vagabond air and so is despised; he is a voluntary outlaw. Peregrination is a way of imitating, and growing in union with, the humiliated Christ."[11] For Sal and Dean, a life "on the road" represents this state of perpetual wandering.

I can imagine that this would present a problem for Christian literary critics and historians who believe that all literature is descended from Christianity (a debatable point given the lines of in-

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fluence which have been traced from the Koran and the Talmud) and caution against conflating the powers of salvation (inherent in those who have truly placed their lives in God's hands) with the powers of the imagination (inherent in literary representations). And that leads to a question that I would like to ask you: To what extent does Dostoevski's Prince Myshkin approximate the Russian cultural image of "holy fool" or "divine idiot"?

EV: The form may be misleading, it is the content which matters and fills the character (both real and fictional). Similar forms may bring different messages, as homonyms, which sound alike but have different meanings. Moriarty and Russian *iurodivyi* may coincide in form but are quite opposite in subject. Dostoevski's Prince Myshkin is another good example of the same point, although his connection with The holy fool tradition is much closer than that of Moriarty.

Depicting the life of Prince Myshkin, Dostoevski uses many details which he borrows from the lives of the holy fools. Myshkin arrives in Saint Petersburg from a Swiss village, where he spent four years in a mental institution. Several Russian holy fools arrived from "the Latin lands." The way Myshkin looks and speaks reveals him as being someone not of this world (by "this" meaning both Russian and worldly). People call him "the idiot" and "the blessed," which in Russian has the connotation of "mad" and "holy" at the same time. There are two almost similar types of saints in the Orthodox tradition: the holy fools and the blessed (*blazhennyi*). Sometimes those two words are used as synonyms (St.Basil the Holy Fool is called the Blessed), but in some way we can speak of the difference between the blessed ones and the holy fools: the blessed (if they are not the holy fools as well) do not pretend that they are mad.

Their behavior is completely natural, however, since they try to imitate (in Orthodoxy we say "follow") Christ, they are sometimes thought to be mad although they do not intentionally act in this way. The majority of the French and Irish saints presented by Saward would be called the Blessed (*Blazhennyi*) in Russia. The blessed in the Christian tradition may be understood as those who take joy in God. The Beatitudes in this sense may be considered as laws for spiritual happiness. Dostoevski emphasizes that the prince has his own idea of happiness. Adelaida asks the prince to tell those assembled about his love affair: "...You should have been in love with

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someone there, tell us please." "I have never been in love," - the prince said quietly and gravely, "I... was happy in a different way." The prince then tells the story of how the children at first did not like him and threw stones at him, but then grew to love him. He relates how he was disdained by the adults and how he tried to help Mary who was persecuted for being an adulterous woman, and how he persuaded the children to sympathize with her and help her. Myshkin's story might have been part of the life of the blessed.

Dostoevski's Idiot is traditionally interpreted in Russia as a Christ-like figure. Prince Myshkin, however, cannot be called a holy man. He has involuntarily received the gift of being a good-natured and innocent man, which is partly caused by his disease, epilepsy, and partly by his character. Saints took pains to transform their personalities and the world around them. Dostoevski creates the image of a "natural saint" as an example of the "natural Christianity" preached by Leo Tolstoy and gives the name of Leo (Lev) Tolstoy to prince Lev Nikolaevich Myshkin.

The question raised by Dostoevski may be addressed to Rousseau and Henry Thoreau and to the natural religion of the Enlightenment in general. Is it natural to be Christian, to be holy, to be innocent? Is there any difference between God and nature? The main idea of Dostoevski's novel, *The Idiot*, is the way the natural devours the spiritual, replacing the spiritual in human life. Compared to the holy fool, Prince Myshkin does not have any spiritual experiences. However, there are a few brief moments before a fit of epilepsy when he experiences "flashes and fleeting moments of supreme sense and consciousness of self" and, consequently, of "supreme being." What does it matter that this is a kind of abnormal tension, if the outcome itself, that moment of sensation, as recollected and examined in a normal condition, proves to have been of the highest degree of beauty and harmony, and gives rise to an inexpressible and previously never experienced sense of completeness, proportion, reconciliation and rapturously prayerful fusion with a supreme synthesis of life?" (1,274) He does not call that completeness God, but uses the philosophical term "the supreme synthesis of life," later widely used by theosophists.....

Prince Myshkin addresses neither Jesus Christ, nor the Holy Trinity nor Our Lady Mary. His instantaneous, spiritual experience is

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caused by disease. It occurs involuntarily. But the prince's disease allows him feel what Christians traditionally learn through sound religious practice: prayer, church service, and sacraments. The rich religious tradition of worshipping God is not presented at all in the novel. The prince's Christianity consists of his innate kindness, softness and moral ideas borrowed from the Bible, theology and philosophy. Rogozhin asks the prince directly: " Do you believe in God or don't you?" (265). Myshkin does not give a definite answer but tells two stories about those who call themselves Christians but at the same time commit crimes and betray the cross. Hence, the next question raised by Dostoevski is as follows: Are natural kindness and knowledge of God able to transform the human soul? The answer is negative and tragic. Kindness and knowledge, not rooted in God, can transform neither the human being nor the world. Prince Myshkin cannot help Nastasya Phillipovna (if he had been a holy fool he would have been miraculously able to aid her with God's help). The prince is weak and unstable. He does not know what is to be done. He is torn between Nastasya Phillipovna and Aglaya, between Saint Petersburg and Moscow. Figuratively speaking, Myshkin himself "dies" but is not raised to a new life. He cannot conquer the death of his soul.

DH: Indeed, it is significant that Dostoevski refers to Myshkin not as "The Holy Fool" or as "The Divine Idiot" but as simply "The Idiot." Similarly, in American literature, there appear such characters whose form (and content) speak to the correlation of spirituality and nature in contexts where Christian practice and worship (or any specific religious worship) do not explicitly appear. Here, we might reference that the United States constitutionally supports a theoretical separation of church and state which, in practice, is constantly contested, blurred, and reinterpreted by social conservatives and liberals alike. There is no small irony in this, for if church and state were clearly separate in the minds of most Americans then we would have no need for the intervention of the state in maintaining that division. The constitutional separation of church and state is an expression of good faith that government should play no role in the promotion of any religion over any other; however, if separation has been enshrined at the level of the state it is because of the complex and multifarious ways in which religious principles and ideas

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about morality and democracy have remained entwined in the American character. Consequently, American literary images or symbols with historical ties to religious traditions are often drained of any particular religious meaning: they must speak to all people of all faiths. Their function becomes connective, natural and spiritual, worldly and divine. The Idiot expresses this ubiquity in our literature. He often appears as a casualty of U.S. history, an agent of salvation in the on-going struggles over the uncertain boundaries of the righteous and the sinful, the sacred and the profane, the social and the spiritual, redemption and damnation. These figures register symbolically—indirectly—in virtually all spheres of American cultural and political life. And they appear most consistently, although not exclusively, in those narratives which engage our national anxieties about one of the great sins (or historical contradictions) which our nation continues to struggle with: the brutalities of race and racism in our history. Here, above all, our Divine Idiots come into play in American culture as figures which promise us some salvation and absolution from the past.

A recent example of this sort of divine idiot character appears in the film *The Green Mile* (1999), an adaptation of the novel by Stephen King.[12] The film tells the story of Paul Edgecomb, a prison guard on Mississippi's death row in the 1930s who comes to befriend an enormous, illiterate African-American inmate. His name is John Coffey and he has been convicted of the brutal rape and murder of two little white girls. However, as Coffey awaits his execution, Edgecomb recognizes that there is something strange about this man: he is kind, gentle, emotional, and frightened of the dark. Could a man such as this have committed such a horrible crime? Edgecomb believes not: he gradually becomes convinced that while Coffey's size and color may be menacing, his character is saintly. And soon thereafter Edgecomb discovers that this huge, beast-like man is actually in possession of a miraculous gift: the power to cure and restore life by the laying on of hands. Simply by touching a dead mouse, Coffey brings it back to life. He similarly cures a woman of an inoperable brain tumor, and cures Edgecomb of a painful bladder infection. Coffey possesses miraculous powers of empathy: he feels the pain of all who suffer; the misery of all creatures is channeled through

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him, and he experiences it as if it were passing through his body. He has prescience and knows the future before it happens.

Coffey is a character in the tradition of the blessed, a divine idiot who does not pretend to be mad. Rather, he considers his blessing a curse, and although he is not guilty of murder he nevertheless wishes to be put to death. Paul Edgecomb, in an effort to save Coffey's life, offers to release him from prison, to organize an appeal on his behalf. Coffee refuses his help. Edgecomb admits that for the first time in his life he is worried that he will go to hell, for when he meets his maker on judgment day he will not be able to explain why he allowed an innocent man—"one of God's true miracles"—to be executed. Coffey assures him that there is nothing he can do but carry out his work orders. He cannot save him, but by allowing the execution to be carried out, he will free him from his terrible suffering.

John Coffey is an idiot character whose function is to redeem American whites of their historical guilt for the crimes that have been committed against blacks. The film simplifies the complex politics of racism and sentimentalizes the relationship between the doomed black man and the white prison guard who does not wish to kill him, but must. Coffey's idiocy—his connection to the suffering Christ—assures Edgecomb's redemption and, indirectly, the redemption of all whites who have stood by mute and voiceless as African-Americans have been put to death, often wrongly, as the majority of those executed in U.S. prisons under the death penalty.

The Beat idiot also constructs romantic myths and displacements concerning the experience of blacks in the United States. In Norman Mailer's influential and controversial essay, "The White Negro," he defines the Beat philosophy of "hip" as one originating from the experience of African-Americans. Mailer fashioned for himself a holy fool persona in the 1960s that constituted a form of political dissent. According to Mailer, the source of hip—as a form of divine idiocy, or simulated psycho-sociopathology—is the American black who has been living in the margins between totalitarianism and democracy for two centuries. He exalts jazz, marijuana, and an unrestrained sexuality as remedies for the ills that plague white Americans—weakness, failure of courage, inertia, boredom, and repression. By doing so, Mailer promotes an image of American

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blacks as "frontiersman...in the Wild West of American night life."[13] However, as James Baldwin argued in his critical response to the essay Mailer also exploits a common derogatory stereotype of black people as more exotic, primitive, and sexual than whites.[14] This idea permeates *On the Road,* as Sal wishes he were "a Negro...a Denver Mexican, or even a poor overworked Jap, anything but what I was so drearily, a 'white man disillusioned.'"[15] He and Dean follow black musicians to black jazz clubs where they seek, in the music of jazz itself, the expression of mystical knowledge, the truth of existence. The black man in America thus epitomizes foolish wisdom, although he has not necessarily sought out this knowledge for himself. Rather it has come to him as a result of his tie to something ancient and tragic. Towards the conclusion of *On the Road,* Sal and Dean seek this inexplicable power in the figure of the Mexican Indian, the great dark Father. They leave the United States for Mexico and here Sal marvels at the "great, grave Indians" who are "not at all like the Pedros and Panchos of silly American lore."[16] At once he suggests that their journey has been a trip backwards through civilization, a lament for the spiritual emptiness of modern American life. Spiritual authenticity and truth, like that which Dean as Idiot is believed to possess in some measure, exists only in the marginal communities of dark "others,"African-American or Mexican, the places where Dean and Sal wish to experience but always wind up leaving in search of more adventure, more pleasure, more motion. In this sense, Dean's idiocy is revealed to be an illusion, an imitation. What they seek is redemption for the sins of the past; for the genocide and the exploitation of blacks. Again, these are the sins which American Divine Idiots promise salvation and redemption for—this is the unspoken nightmare of history, the truths that only an idiot dare speak. Yet Mailer still referred to the Beat movement as "a muted, cool, religious revival" (592).

EV: The pictorial symbol of Dostoevski's novel, *The Idiot,* is *Dead Christ* (1521) by Hans Holbein, Jr. (1497-1543), which the artist painted from the figure of a drowned man. As Ippolit describes *Dead Christ* in "Clarification":

> The picture depicted Christ just after He had been taken down from the cross. ... It is ... the corpse of a man who has suffered boundless agony prior to the crucifixion - wounds, torture, being beaten by the guards and the people..... The

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> eyes are open and squinting, the big and wide open whites glinting with a deathly and glassy sheen. But strange to say, a look at the corpse of this tortured man gives rise to a peculiar and curious question: if exactly the same kind of corpse... was seen by all His disciples, the chief future apostles, by the women who had tended Him and now stood at the cross, and by all who believed in Him and worshiped Him, then how could they believe, as they gazed on it, that this martyr would rise from the dead? The thought involuntarily arises at this point: if death is so awesome, and the laws of nature so inexorable, how can they be overcome? How are they to be overcome when they were not vanished even by Him Who subdued nature itself in His lifetime, and Whom nature obeyed when He cried out 'Talitha cumi' (Damsel, I say unto thee, arise) (Mark,5, 39) and the maiden arose; 'Lazarus, come forth!' and the dead man came forth? As one looks at the picture, one seems to conceive nature as a huge, implacable and dumb beast, or, more correctly, nay, far more correctly, though it may sound strange, as some giant and most up-to-date machine which has senselessly seized, mangled and swallowed, unhearingly and callously, a great and precious Being, a Being Who alone was worth all of nature and all its laws, was worth the whole world, which had perhaps been created solely for the sake of that Being's advent! The picture seems to express and make one involuntarily aware of the very idea of that somber, brazen, and senselessly eternal force, to which everything is subordinated. (2,104).

There is no divine power in Dostoevski's Prince Myshkin. There is only the human mind and heart, which is drawn to extremes. That is why many religious motifs (apocalyptic, penitential, those of resurrection, etc.) are presented in an hysterical, chaotic, and distorted way. The idea of distortion and lack of harmony is present from the very beginning of the narrative in the portraits of prince Myshkin and Rogozhin and in the description of St. Petersburg. The tension between the ideal and reality grows on different levels in the narrative. Considering the saint (the holy fool or the blessed) as a model for the character of the Idiot, we can speak of the discrepancy between the model and the pseudo-holy type of character introduced by Dostoevski. Prince Myshkin is the noblest one in the group of pseudo-holy fool characters. The other characters, among whom are

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Ivolgin, Lebedev, Ippolit and Ferdyzshenko, look like parodies of the protagonist. Compared to the prince, they do not have any moral principles. They easily switch from friendship to hatred and from faithfulness to betrayal. Fictional idiots don't want to be treated as fools: "Look here, Mr.Myshkin, - Ippolit screeched, - you should realize that we are not fools, not egregious fools, as all your guests and those ladies probably think..." (1,327). Ekaterina Starkova writes that "inveterate clowns in the story, Lebedev and Geveral Ivolgin, provide an ironical touch to the plot with a sweep that is truly Shakespearean" (1,20). The figures of the mad Rogozhin and the sick, hysterical Ippolit make that touch tragi-ironical. "Paradise is a difficult business, Prince, far more difficult that it seems to your kindly heart" - one of Myshkin's friends says. The Prince's inability to create "paradise" either inside or outside of himself proves the deficiency of nature, which lacks divine energy.

DH: Illness and/or physical deformity or handicap is an equally important feature of the American idiot, as is the case with Dostoevski's Prince Myshkin. American culture is very anxious about the body. Our popular culture tells us that American bodies must be styled, disciplined, beautiful, youthful, and sexual (not to mention rich and white), and the absence of these traits marks the Idiot as an outsider graced with the possibility of transcending the fetishization of the body. Often the precise nature of the idiot's illness is left vague, but it is this weakened condition which nevertheless is a sign of the idiot's greater spiritual strength. Illness grants him extraordinary powers of healing and empathy with fellow sufferers, most significantly the crucified Christ. Illness grants the idiot freedom to be an observer of worldly activity rather than a participant in a world driven by greed, lust, and desire. Divine idiots in American literature and culture thus represent a complex relation to the body and to the condition of embodiment. Indeed, to rid oneself of the flesh and all its markings and trappings of race, gender, longing, and desire, would be a virtue, in a spiritual sense. However, in a society where indifference to "difference" is believed to be as much the foundation of our equality as the demonstration of differences, this condition may also be apprehended as an equivocation as well. In this sense, the idiocy of the divine idiot is always representative of difference, and yet—in that very difference—rep-

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resentative of the lowest common denominator, the great equalizer of the American spiritual imaginary. The American idiot must, by necessity, represent human possibilities of abdicating the flesh, worldly possibilities of transcendence for a people who share no common origin, religion, or relation to the divine, and he must represent the problems of democratic embodiment for a pluralistic society where, ostensibly, no "body" is privileged above any other.

William Faulkner dramatizes this predicament by focusing on forms of idiot consciousness. For Faulkner, this interior consciousness has allegorical meaning. Historically, the divine idiot "was believed in his mad utterances to reveal secrets of the unseen world."[17] Faulkner's idiots point to that which stands outside the logic of language, outside the Disneyfied, disciplined myths of history and origin that conceal Frederic Jameson's "historical nightmare." In Faulkner's fiction the "unseen world" is the collectively repressed past. "The recurring presence of the idiot...appears as a desperate attempt, against all odds, to proclaim and shout the possibility of innocence (like Benjy who keeps howling or moaning, barred as he is of any other way of 'trying to say it')."[18] Benjy remains outside of organized speech, or outside of what Jacques Lacan would call the order of language. From the perspective of psychoanalytic theory, then, one could say that the idiot speaks from the lawless realm of the unconscious, a realm that at once defines us and remains beyond our reach. It suggests the disorder of conventional logic and history. The idiot remains locked out of the world of concrete symbols, a figure of sublime disorder and chaos. He acts counter to accepted values and norms, so that he may appear blasphemous and irreverent. He appears to inhabit a world of his own, a world turned upside down, much like Mihkail Bahktin's Rabelesian world of carnival.

EV: But the sublime area cannot be disorder and chaos, it presents the supreme order and cosmos. I think that idiots in literature don't present any ideal but the problem of our modern inability to perceive, to accept the holy world as the norm, the true values of life. The connection of the idiot figure with the holy fool tradition makes it ambivalent: the idiot refers to the idea of salvation as well as represents the madness of the social establishment. *Iuorodivyi* consciously "plays sins" to show people how ugly they are in the eyes

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of God. In literature it is the author who "plays sin" when s/he creates characters who represent the idiotic world. The category of idiocy is ambivalent itself: it's positive in its opposition to the world of sinful minds and negative because the insane "mask" of the idiot (even a natural one in literature, because it's created by the author) reveals the essence of the human society.

Ambivalent is the common opposition of man and mice in three idiot stories: Dostoevski's *The Idiot*, Stephen King's *The Green Mile* and Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. The mouse is a key image in Steinbeck's short novel with an idiot in the center. The title somehow extends the metaphorical name of Prince Myshkin. The naturalness of the idiot is developed by Steinbeck to its extreme. Lennie Small (Myshkin's last name is also "small") is an imbecilic giant, a good-hearted, big man with the mind of a child. This short novel opens with the description of the two men opposed to each other (Dostoevski starts with the description of Rogozhin and Myshkin). Behind George Milton "walked his opposite, a huge man, shapeless of face, with large pale eyes (Dostoevski's idiot's eyes are large and blue) with wide sloping shoulders, and he walked heavily, dragging his feet a little, the way a bear drags his paws. His arms did not swing at his sides, but hung loosely" (9). Lennie walks and drinks like an animal: "he dropped his blankets and flung himself down and drank from the surface of the green pool; drank with long gulps, snorting into the water like a horse" (10). This detail is an allusion to the Biblical army of Gideon which was divided into two parts: "Every one that lappeth of the water with his tongue as a dog lappeth, him shalt thou set by himself; likewise every one that boweth down upon his knees to drink" (Judges, 7, 5).

Lennie is a kind fellow. Kindness seems to be his main virtue. "He is a nice fella" - said Slim. "Guy don't need no sense to be a nice fella. Seems to me sometimes it jus' works the other way around. Take a real smart guy and he ain't hardly ever a nice fella" (73). The problem is that Lennie involuntarily kills those he loves. He loves catching and petting mice, but they soon die under his bear-like paw. He loves a little puppy so much that he cannot live without it. The poor thing soon dies of Lennie's petting. Lennie finally kills Curly's wife who provokes him to pet her soft hair. (Prince Myshkin doesn't kill Nastasya Pilippovna but his kindness in some way provokes

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the catastrophe). Lennie is charmed by her beauty but his caress kills the woman. His kindness turns out to be violence. (Myshkin's kindness does not do any good either)

The structure of both stories has a "kind idiot" as a protagonist, a love triangle with a wanton woman, and an older lady authority (Epanchina and Aunt Clara). The idiot wants to be part of society, wants to find his place, his role (to be accepted in Saint Petersburg society or to buy his own farm). Steinbeck makes his characters and motifs simple, primitive, down to earth. George kills his protege in order to save him from lynching.

Prince Myshkin represents a rational, sentimental type of culture and mentality. He knows about God and knows Christianity as a philosophical teaching. He tries to be good, kind, and loving in a natural way. But he unaware of any spiritual experience. The prince is neither of this world nor of heaven. He rushes about in the two worlds the same way he rushes about Moscow and Saint Petersburg, cannot make his choice with Aglaya and Nastasya Phillipovna. Steinbeck's idiot is a hyperbole for a materialistic culture, which is represented by the body, physical power and uncontrolled feelings. The idiot's personality includes a body and "half of a soul"—feeling. The man, having lost his mind, lacks any moral control.

DH: You offer an interesting interpretation of Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men;* however it is an interpretation with which I cannot entirely agree. In order to explain why, let's go back to your opening comment about the concept of the sublime because I see some variation in your understanding of the term that may help explain the variation in our interpretations of Steinbeck's text. According to nineteenth century romantic philosophers (here I'm thinking of the English romantic poets—Coleridge, Wordsworth, Byron, Shelley, etc., as well as the German aesthetic philosophers of the romantic movement) the aesthetic category of the sublime represents, above all, paradox: beauty so intense that it can produce revulsion; spiritual perfection so extreme that it becomes simultaneously a destructive force. It is from these nineteenth-century aesthetic philosophies that American romanticism developed a particular view of the powers of nature. This view can be traced to early American landscape paintings, where the enormity and intensity of raw, majestic nature overwhelms and literally dwarfs (rendering mouse-like) the human fig-

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ures who often appear as minuscule objects somewhere in the far distance, almost invisible. Nature becomes virtually synonymous with the sublime, and while "IT" (in the Emersonian sense) may indeed be cosmic, it is not all sweetness and light. It is a brilliant, but brutal force that at one and the same time nurtures and yet overpowers human efforts to subdue and tame it.

Enter Lenny, from Steinbeck's *Of Mice and Men*. His idiocy could be said to figure nature and especially the untamed American West: wild, dumb, beastly, indifferent to civilized behaviors and morals. Steinbeck's idiot represents the American sublime: he figures that current of the American character which has been molded by the clash of brute nature with human efforts, foibles, and failures to bring nature to heel, to control it, destroy it. In American literature of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, a key theme is that of nature as an indifferent force (witness Stephen Crane's "The Open Boat," in addition to the works of the Naturalists, Jack London and Frank Norris). In such works, Darwin's philosophy of natural selection conflicts forcefully with the concept of Christian salvation, thus making American and European literature of the period a far less reliable heir apparent of Christianity than could properly assure both Don Quixote and Don Corleone (from *The Godfather* films) a lasting immortality. Again, I think the problem in addressing the significance of the divine idiot or holy fool in Western literature is less a matter of canonization than of understanding the various cultural environments and philosophical currents which have animated these figures at different points in history.

In European as well as in American literary traditions, holy fools generally represent paradox. However, the specific theological/philosophical nature of the paradox and its cultural origins are as varied as idiots themselves. I will conclude this essay by trying to explain the kind of paradox which the American idiot represents. In the American idiot there exists something that is innocent and destructive, sacred and dangerous. This idea is expressed in the first line of Allen Ginsberg's poem, *Howl*, when he laments having witnessed "The best minds of my generation destroyed," and it is discussed by Norman Mailer in "The White Negro" when he claims that the most exciting and disturbing element of the beat character is that the "incompatibilities have come to bed, the inner life and the

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violent life, the orgy and the dream of love, the desire to murder and the desire to create, a dialectical conception of existence...".[19] In this sense, the idiot is one in whom opposite forces join together, in whom contrary forces come home to rest.

But, of course, there is nothing uniquely American in this. It is possible to compare this idea with the 19th century British romantic idea of dialectic, as expressed in William Blake's "Marriage of Heaven and Hell" and William Wordsworth's "emotion recollected in tranquility." It is also possible—and for our purposes necessary—to compare this with Dostoevski's own dialectical conception on which he based *The Idiot,* his desire to create a novel that would explore the theme of "boundless idealism bound together with boundless sensuality." In *The Idiot,* these two extremes are embodied by the idealistic Myshkin, on one side, and by the libidinous Totsky, General Yepanchin, Rogozhin, and Nastassya Phillipovna. In Dean Moriarty these two extremes are joined together in one character. Dean contains both extreme idealism and extreme sexuality. However, like Prince Myshkin, Dean defines the idiot as a "person with double-thoughts," the all-too human and the all-too spiritual. There is a dual movement in both Dostoevski's and Kerouac's novels, dual movement which explores the capacity for the co-existence of good and evil within men, the co-existence of divinity and destruction. For Jack Kerouac and the writers of the Beat movement, this double-capacity was a necessary response to the violence, complacency, and hypocrisy of post-war American life. The figure of the holy goof in Beat writing emerges, in this particular historical instance, from the ashes of the Hiroshima, the ovens of Auschwitz, and the brutality of the modern state. Only an outlaw who is also an idiot could bring salvation to those who have become accustomed to living in such a state. Indeed, he would have to be an idiot—an innocent reborn of nature—precisely in the sense that Kerouac gave it: "not something that sulked and sneered; it was a wild yea-saying overburst of American joy, it was Western, the west wind, an ode from the Plains, something new, long-prophesied, long a-coming."[20]

EV: As I understand: literary Idiots are bad rebels against the worse world. So there is no any positive foundation to rely upon, the world is just the mixture of the creative and the destructive, the

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positive and the negative, which reminds me of Gnostic *sugcusiz arcinh* (total confusion).

But in Russia we learn in our childhood that there are good characters (Ivan the Fool, the princess or a fairy) in fairy tales and villains (Baba Yaga Bony Leg, the Immortal Skeleton, the dragon etc.), so there must be clear distinction between love and murder, chastity and lust, generosity and greed, etc. Modern literature shows that there is no clear distinction between good and evil in human life but literature presents this confusion as a conflict, usually as a tragedy (both idiots, Prince Myshkin and Lennie, are tragic figures) or dramatic ones (eg. Moriarty).

According to Christianity (it is the Christian theological sublime I speak of, which is closer to Coleridge's concept but far from Byron's...their romantic philosophies are very different). Nature is fallen nature. It fell along with man, hence, it lacks harmony and presents the mixture, "the Marriage of Heaven and Hell," which Christians are trying to break and to cleanse themselves of in order to ascend from Hell to Heaven. Russian *iurodivyi* as well as Greek *saloi* and other saints broke the Marriage of Hell and Heaven when they left the world and followed Christ, while their descendants in literature, fools and idiots, showed how tragic it is to be an outsider when they have no God to follow.

DH: In American culture, folk culture as well as mass culture, we also grow up with fairy tales, folk tales, and fables that teach us the difference between good and evil, godliness and godlessness. These lessons are also communicated through aspects of our popular culture in which there are very clear distinctions between the forces of light and dark, the moral and the wicked (Take, for example, the *Star Wars* series, or the recent film *Babe*, in which there is no ambiguity or uncertainty as to the difference between villain and hero). Many of us carry these lessons with us into our adulthood, and—if we are fortunate enough to receive good guidance and education—we learn how to integrate these values into our lives. Of course, not everyone is so fortunate. American culture champions the individual and this sometimes means that each individual must find his/her own God.

This dialogue has clearly demonstrated to me that Christian studies and literary studies are two very different sciences. There is value

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in observing the ways in which these sciences intersect, however I think there is just as much value in observing the ways that they do not. The reason for this is because great literature is not reducible to any purely moralistic function ("Tell the truth, but tell it slant," as Emily Dickinson said.) The art of Wallace Stevens and T.S. Eliot is not reducible to children's fairy tales, nor can literature be treated as pure Christian doctrine. To see literature this way would be to impoverish the diverse arts of language, history, culture, as well as the rich diversity of human experience. I believe that literature, at its best, can provide an arena for open-minded questioning and exploration—exploration of the painful mysteries and vast dimensions of the human heart, mind, and spirit with all its longing, striving, and imperfections. Christian studies may concern itself with fools who, in the eyes of church fathers, achieve spiritual perfection. However, literary fools must remain imperfect explorers, for they are but reflections and distortions of what little we can be sure of in a world that is not all bad, and not all good, but human...all too human.

1 Research for this project was supported by a grant from the International Research & Exchanges Board (IREX), with funds provided by the Carnegie Corporation of New York. Neither of these organizations is responsible for the views expressed.

2 John Saward, *Perfect Fools: Folly for Christ's Sake in Catholic and Orthodox Spirituality* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1980): ix. See also Enid Welsford, *The Fool: His Social and Literary History* (London: Faber, 1968) and Sandra Billington, *A Social History of the Fool* (Sussex: The Harvester's Press, 1984).

3 Saward, 2.

4 Saward, x (Introduction).

5 Another recent film, *Dogma* (U.S. 1999), refers to this tradition in its satirical critique of contemporary religious politics, intolerance, and the vanity and arrogance of institutional church leadership in contemporary U.S. society. Two banished angels, damned to live among humans for all eternity, discover a loophole that can get them back into heaven. However, by exploiting that loophole they will bring about the end of all earthly existence. A Catholic woman named Bethany, who works in an abortion clinic and attends church regularly (although she has lost her faith), is called upon by the voice of God to prevent the angels from carrying out their plan. Her efforts and encounters with various unlikely prophets and apostles reveal that Jesus is actually a black man and that God is a woman. When the latter appears on screen (played by the pop singer, Alanis Morrisette) she smiles with an idiot grin, does headstands in the church garden, and displays forms of wisdom and power that are clearly childlike and foolish.

6 See Douglas Sun, "'Change It! This Sucks!': Beavis and Butt-head, Idiot Savants of Cultural Criticism." *New Directions in American Humor,* ed. David E. E. Sloane (Tuscaloosa and London: University of Alabama Press, 1998) 11-25.

7 Sergei Selianov, "Cinema and Life" (October 1997), *Russia on Reels: The Russian Idea in Post-Soviet Cinema,* Birgit Beumers, ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999) 45-6.

8 Jack Kerouac, *On the Road* (New York: Penguin Books, 1955, 57) 193-94.

9 American Heritage Dictionary, 400.

10 See Paul Buhle, *Marxism in the United States: Remapping the History of the American Left* (London: Verso, 1987, 1991).

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11 Saward, 44.
12 *The Green Mile*, dir. Frank Darabount, perf. Tom Hanks, Michael Duncan, David Morse, Barry Pepper, Warner Brothers, 1999.
13 Norman Mailer, "The White Negro," *Advertisements For Myself* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1959) 313.
14 James Baldwin, "The Black Boy Looks at the White Boy," *Nobody Knows My Name: More Notes of a Native Son* (New York: Dial Press, 1961) 216-41.
15 Kerouac, 180.
16 Kerouac, 280-81.
17 Francois Pitavy, "Idiocy and Idealism," eds. Michel Gresset and Patrick Samsay, S.J., *Faulkner and Idealism: Perspectives from Paris* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1983) 97-111.
18 Pitavy, 98.
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